DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 629 RC 012 711

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TITLE Community Problem Solving and Small/Rural Schools.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; *Change Strategies; Community Change; Community Organizations; Community Problems; Demography; *Educational Change; Educational Finance; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Responsibility; Migration Patterns; Models; *Population Trends; Problem Solving; *Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; Small Schools; *Social Change

ABSTRACT

Because demographic and social changes in rural communities also affect small and rural school environments, schools must consider the impact of community change and plan accordingly. Rural school administrators, who are visible and respected, know how to work with groups, and understand the local community, are well qualified to provide their communities with planning leadership and management and to guide problem solving efforts. Rothman has defined three problem solving models, seldom seen in their distinct form, that are often used in growing, static, and declining communities: the community development model, in which the community works as a whole; the social planning model, in which the power structure sponsors fact-finding by professional planners; and the social action model, in which parts of the community seek to reallocate community power and resources. Communities experiencing rapid growth often have overcrowded schools and problems with school finance and administration. Communities experiencing decline often face the reduction or elimination of educational programs or personnel, increased taxes, or school consolidation. Early response to demographic and social community change is essential. An effective change process for small towns must consider broad based planning, trusted implementation assistance, and an institutional base to sustain the change effort. (SB)

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COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING AND SMALL/RURAL SCHOOLS

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COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING AND
SMALL AND/OR RURAL SCHOOLS

Small towns and rural areas are feeling the impact of the many social and demographic changes taking place all over America. Changing trends in values and attitudes, population redistribution, the metropolitan to non-metropolitan population movement, and the shift in the basic population mix to fewer children and more adults and older persons promises to greatly affect all communities. Because changes in the community affect the school environment and students' potential for learning, it is important that small/rural schools consider these impacts in their long-range planning.

SMALL TOWNS: CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Although small towns exhibit a broad range of diversity it is not impossible to select certain characteristics that seem to be typical of all. Whether with stable, increasing, or declining populations, small towns have apparently escaped the crowds, noise, fear and violence of urban places. They do have negative aspects: shortages of housing, medical services, public transportation, diversions for the young and appropriate environments for the aged, a rapidly increasing crime rate and an accident rate higher than that of urban areas. If the town is incorporated it usually struggles with a tight budget, if unincorporated, with lack of a formalized system for meeting needs. Unless the town is in a period of fairly rapid growth, most experience downtown decay. The young and the old comprise large segments of the population. Estimates for 1984 suggest that 43.9 percent of the population living in the 178 Texas counties having less than 25,000 total population will be under

14 and over 65 years of age, while for the state as a whole estimates suggest that 37.5 percent will be under 14 and over 65. (Texas Department...1981). In addition, poverty afflicts many. For the elderly, blacks, Mexican Americans and Anglos the incidence of poverty is considerably higher in rural than urban areas (Rural Health..., 1980).

Small towns can also be depicted as having a sense of community, a concept more keenly felt than precisely defined as "the close bonds that characterize social interactions". Perhaps it is that "intimate communal familiarity" which evidences itself, especially to those born and raised there, as "both affectionate support and unrelenting intrusion" (Trippett, 1980). Although small towns are generally perceived as places where the good life can be lived, newer migrants are generally seen by longtime residents as unaware of how things happen in small communities and as having no stake in the future of the community.

In spite of the fact that urban areas and small towns appear to be quite different, Christenson and Photiadis have concluded that the value patterns, as well as the degree of alientation, for residents of small towns and large cities are essential identical (Christenson, 1973; Photiadis, 1973). Changes in the social and cultural patterns which have historically characterized rural areas have come as a result of the powerful media of communications, especially through the influence of the suburban middle class models presented on television. Despite these and other similarities, rural and urban cultures exhibit distinct characteristics. In the largely passive rural culture schools exhibit a unique relationship with the communities in which they exist. Because the social structure

centers on the school, school business is also community business. Changes which occur in the community also affect the school.

Many social and demographic trends have already impinged upon the educational systems in small towns and rural areas. Schools are being forced to adjust to (1) the increasing percentage of older and middle-aged persons and the smaller percentage of children, (2) an upsurge in the number of single parent homes and working mothers, (3) an increasingly strong older voting bloc, and (4) the stronger competition for jobs as young persons compete with an older, experienced workforce. Increasingly, administrators are interested in how these trends will affect the achievements of students.

COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING MODELS

In order to effect an accommodation of the changes taking place, administrators must be aware of social and demographic trends, knowledgeable of problem solving techniques, and willing and able to assume leadership in the community.

Perhaps Rothman's three models of community organization (Arabzabegen, 1980) may clarify the methods of community problem solving which can be used in dealing with all types of issues. These techniques are commonly used in all types of communities, static, growing, and declining.

The community development mode uses a participatory democratic approach. The broadest possible section of the population is involved in the problem solving. Those who use this approach view the local power structure as collaborators rather than adversaries or oppressors. The problem solver

is viewed as a coordinator. Emphasis is on keeping a low profile and encouraging community members to take action as leaders.

The social planning model assumes that there are substantial social problems which require solutions although these problems may not necessarily be perceived as such by the population. The approach is one of factfinding by professional planners. The community power structure is seen as sponsor. The problem-solver may be analyst, data collector and facilitator and will probably take a prominent role. Participation of community members is not seen as necessary.

The objective of the social action model is the re-allocation of resources and power from the "haves" to the "have-nots" and assumes that some community members have been deprived through systematic oppression. Change strategies include polarization of the oppressed and oppressor groups and crystalization of real or symbolic issues. The methods are confrontative. The community power structure is seem as the oppressors to be overthrown.

In actual practice, Rothman's models are seldom seen in their distinct form. Effective change agents use the most appropriate elements of each in order to reach their objective. However, a recent study sponsored by the National Institute of Education indicates that other factors must be considered in situations involving schools in small/rural communities. These factors include gaining consensus on the problem by the community, assuring that the experts offering assistance are trusted and accepted, and assuring that the effort will continue even though key personnel leaves the community (Nachtigal, 1980). How elements of these models are

often used in growing and declining communities can be seen by examining typical patterns of change.

GROWING AND DECLINING COMMUNITIES: TYPICAL PATTERNS OF CHANGE

In a situation where growth is occuring social changes happen because the people moving into a community are carriers of new ideas and ways of doing things. If population growth is slow a gradual social change will be accommodated with slight awareness. However, if the growth is rapid, it may cause a time of dis-organization necessitating adjustments which may have negative or positive results. The positive gains may not be realized or identified right away. Rapid population growth confronts educational systems with the immediate problem of dealing with a large increase in the number of students with new ideas, expectations, values and behavior modes as well as problems involving facilities and staff. Severe overcrowding is seen as the major problem. The problems involving finance and administration will require attention on a continuing and long range basis.

The impact of population growth in a community will be affected by the bases and status of the local economy which may or may not be growing at a rate commensurate with the population expansion. In areas where the economy is rapidly growing the tax base is probably growing also. The increased tax base generates increased revenue for education thereby allowing the district to provide needed additional facilities. In areas where population increases are not matched by a proportionately increased tax base the educational system may have problems in passing a school bond issue or in raising local monies to meet increased needs. It should

be remembered that the power structure of a community is generally tied to local businesses, is conservative in outlook, and will usually act against change (Gehlen, 1969; Tait, 1975). Research by Pellegren (as noted by Gehlen, 1969) shows that the power structure of a community is not vitally concerned with what happens in the schools; it will, however, make decisions on educational matters when an economic question of consequence is involved (Gehlen, 1969).

Although the reasons for migrating to small towns and the characteristics which the newer residents bring with them may vary substantially, they are usually younger, better educated, and of higher economic status that the native population. Newcomers often "adopt" the town where they now live, and although they may become interested and involved, their major commitments may be to a cosmopolitan group in a nearby city. In-migrants' efforts to "improve" their new community may be viewed as an attempt to do something "to" or "for" long time residents and not "with" them.

It seems evident that the school is the potential battle ground between long time residents and recent migrants. Long time residents are usually content with the school. While many newcomers report that they move to small towns because the schools are believed to be more desirable than the schools they left, they will exert pressure and initiate community action to bring elements of the school more in line with their desires. Some may use opposition to increased school taxes as a way to bring about changes. It is possible that a taxpayer revolt, while it may represent general opposition to increased taxes, may also

represent a demand for greater participation in local decision making for the schools. Childless in-migrants and older persons on fixed incomes may lack information about school programs and needs because they have neither formal nor informal communications systems with the school. They may also be unsympathetic toward issues which may increase taxes.

In rapid growth situations substantial economic and social costs can be avoided if planning for expected growth occurs early and involves a long range perspective. A crucial issue is the extent to which community leaders, perhaps the school administrator or representatives of the school board, should and can anticipate and respond to population growth and its resultant changes.

In a community where the population density is declining, changes may be evidenced by a decrease in the number of children and increase in the percentage of older persons. Many community services may have deteriorated and others may no longer be available. In some instances, physical isolation of the community is increased as a result of transportation changes, as in the case where automobile traffic is switched to limited access highways.

Most migration out of a community involves persons wishing to make a net economic gain. Apparently unable to earn a satisfactory living from traditional agriculture or other businesses, out-migrants tend to leave the rural environment without much information or deliberation. Those making decisions and moves depend primarily on relatives, friends, and neighbors for information and advice.

Studies by Gehlen and Bertrand have shown that the persons staying

in the community are no less capable or intelligent than out-migrants (Gehlen, 1969; Bertrand, 1958). Among those who stay are those who represent the major values and power in that location. Values tend to be more traditional and change tends to come more slowly in this situation. Existing constraints are homogenity and isolation. In the homogenous community there is less disagreement over values, and therefore, less conflict, unless a question of economic consequence arises. Declining enrollment in the school is such an issue because it forces the question of raising local school taxes to support the school. Since the amount of state dollars awarded to a school is often based on the number of students in average daily attendance, as well as certain other factors, state support may decrease if enrollment declines. At the same time, because of minimum state standards, mandated programs and services, and other costs such as maintenance, gasoline, and repairs for school buses, utilities, etc., the local costs may be rising.

Eventual resolution of the problem caused by declining enrollments may be accomplished as communities work through these steps:

1. Administrative recognition of declining enrollments--
   Recognition usually comes because of declining state dollars.
2. Initial search behavior of the administrator--Is this a trend?
3. Administrator generation of policy alternatives.
4. Superintendent-school board discussion.
5. School board conducted public discussion.
6. School board meeting.
7. School board decision (Burlingam, 1978).

When it is realized that public school enrollment is declining to a significant degree it becomes evident that action must be taken. The issue will raise questions that seem to offer these alternatives: (1) reduce

or eliminate programs and/or personnel, (2) increase taxes, or (3) consolidate. Consolidation, however, is not actually an alternative in instances where the distance between districts is already great. The initial response by the school board is dominated by administratively controlled economic considerations. However, reactions by elements of the community to visible changes, actual reductions in course offerings or extra curricula activities, for example, produce sharp discord in the community. Issues, such as the long term fate of the community, the expertise of the administrator's cost accounting and population projections, and the consequences for the educational chances of students if programs are reduced, may be introduced and discussed at length.

The problem solving process and the nature of the alternatives provides community members the opportunity to align into factions. The first faction, which forms almost immediately, is made of those who feel wronged by the situation. They experience an intensified sense of identity with the group and are prepared to invest time, energy and resources for the cause. The opposing faction forms later and is composed of those who are displeased with the present situation in the school and those who oppose the majority in-group in the community.

Efforts will be made to resolve the problem by cutting programs or increasing taxes while maintaining minimum state standards. If however, closing and consolidation are chosen, they provide standards against which community members can judge whether they won or lost and provides an opportunity to maintain and increase or obtain political power in the community.

CONCLUSION

Administrators in small and/or rural schools face a challenge as they work with community problems that impact the functioning of the system. Although it might be simpler to stay detached from those areas that seem to impact the school only indirectly, it is the administrator's responsibility to provide a setting where students can achieve, and to provide leadership and direction in problem solving.

Aspects of the challenge facing administrators include finding time to work with community related dilemmas and using an effective problem solving model. An effective change process for use in small towns and rural communities encourages consideration of these factors:

(1) Broad based planning in defining and planning the effort--A community must be convinced that a problem exists.

(2) Providing implementation assistance--Assistance must be readily available, timely, relevant, and responsive to local needs. Local individuals can be trained to be the experts or trusted individuals can provide assistance.

(3) Building an institutional base--Ensure that sufficient expertise and support remain in the community to sustain the effort if key participants move on (Nachtigal, 1980).

Of course, implemenation strategies must also be consistent with the realities of how change is accomplished in small and/or rural schools and communities.

Despite the problems inherent in situations demanding long and short

range planning and sensitive management, the administrator is well qualified for the task. The administrator understands the local community, is visible and respected, and knows how to work with groups. Because of these strengths he/she can provide the leadership to work through these problems.

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